

**Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the 'Communication from the Commission — European benchmarks in education and training: follow-up to the Lisbon European Council'**

(COM(2002) 629 final)

(2003/C 133/10)

On 20 November 2002 the Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the above-mentioned communication.

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 4 March 2003. The rapporteur was Mr Koryfidis.

At its 398th plenary session on 26 and 27 March 2003 (meeting of 26 March), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 101 votes in favour, with one abstention.

## 1. Introduction

1.1. The strategic goal set by the Lisbon European Council in March 2000 for Europe to become by 2010 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion'<sup>(1)</sup> has been crucial in providing the momentum for closer European cooperation in the field of education and training.

1.2. This cooperation<sup>(2)</sup>, which is necessary in all respects, not only to achieve the Lisbon objectives, but more generally with a view to European integration, has so far established a number of important points of reference, including the following:

- an agreement<sup>(3)</sup> between the Heads of State and Government on certain concrete common objectives for education and training systems in Europe as part of the wider principle of lifelong learning;
- a report<sup>(4)</sup> 'on the concrete future objectives of education and training systems';
- a new overall goal<sup>(3)</sup> 'to make Europe's education and training systems a world quality reference by 2010';

- a joint detailed work programme<sup>(5)</sup> on the objectives of education and training systems in Europe, including an explanation of how the Open Method of Coordination may be applied to the sector in question and provision for the Commission and the Council to submit an interim joint progress report on the implementation of the programme to the Spring European summit in 2004.

1.3. The present Communication is an attempt by the Commission to fill a real gap, which is the lack of specific European benchmarks for promoting the above-mentioned programme and specifically for measuring progress towards a particular goal as part of an objective system of comparative assessment.

1.4. It should be noted that, according to Articles 149 and 150 of the EU Treaty, the Member States have full responsibility for teaching content and the organisation of education and training systems. It therefore falls to the Member States to take measures to achieve the common education goals and the relevant Lisbon objectives. In this sense, the Open Method of Coordination in the field of education and training does not have the same implications or the same ramifications in practice as it does in other EU policy areas (e.g. the economy, employment).

1.4.1. Overall, the above observation does not undermine the substance of the Commission proposal on a European role and European dimension in questions of education, training and particularly lifelong learning. On the contrary, it demonstrates the powerful momentum which has recently developed in the EU towards achieving the Lisbon objectives. This momentum is such that, in a number of cases, it is having the

(1) Conclusions of the Lisbon European Council, 23-24 March 2000, point 5.

(2) The cooperation also includes the candidate countries.

(3) Conclusions of the Barcelona European Council, 15-16 March 2002, point 43.

(4) Council document 6365/02 of 14.2.2001.

(5) COM(2001) 501 final.

effect of breaking through the existing institutional barriers and boundaries which stand in the way of meeting today's needs <sup>(1)</sup>. Those needs relate to Europe's position in the world and its role in shaping a new and modern global political, economic, social and technological balance. The driving force and, at the same time, the objective of this momentum are the knowledge, policies and tools associated with it and, by extension, education.

## 2. The Commission proposal

2.1. The Commission proposal calls on the Council to adopt the following European benchmarks by May 2003 <sup>(2)</sup>:

- By 2010, all Member States should at least halve the rate of early school leavers, with reference to the rate recorded in the year 2000, in order to achieve an EU-average rate of 10 % or less.
- By 2010, Member States will have at least halved the level of gender imbalance among graduates in mathematics, science, technology whilst securing an overall significant increase of the total number of graduates, compared to the year 2000.
- By 2010, Member States should ensure that average percentage of 25-64 years olds in the EU with at least upper secondary education reaches 80 % or more.
- By 2010, the percentage of low-achieving 15 year olds in reading, mathematical and scientific literacy will be at least halved in each Member State.
- By 2010, the EU-average level of participation in lifelong learning should be at least 15 % of the adult working age

population (25-64 age group) and in no country should it be lower than 10 %.

2.2. The Commission also emphasises as a sixth benchmark (but first in terms of priority) achievement of the Lisbon objective of substantial annual increases in per capita investments in human resources, and, in this respect, calls on the Member States to set transparent benchmarks <sup>(3)</sup> to be communicated to the Council and Commission as provided for in the detailed work programme on the objectives for education and training systems.

2.3. The Commission supports its proposal for the Council to adopt the six European benchmarks above by

- giving specific reasons for its choice to keep the benchmarks at European level <sup>(4)</sup>;
- explaining how the indicators for monitoring progress on each separate objective are determined <sup>(5)</sup>;
- adopting a specific standard format for measuring progress <sup>(6)</sup>;
- defining what the Open Method of Coordination is and how it will be used in the field of education <sup>(7)</sup>.

## 3. General comments

3.1. In its opinions on education, training and lifelong learning <sup>(8)</sup>, the EESC has highlighted the importance of

<sup>(1)</sup> A typical example is the first of the points agreed by the Council on 14 February 2002 (2002/C 58/01) which reads as follows: 'The Council, the Member States and the Commission have the responsibility for ensuring the outcome of the follow-up work, each within their respective areas of competence. The Council, in cooperation with the Commission, has responsibility for deciding on the main subjects of the educational and training objectives as well as on whether and where to use indicators, peer-reviews, exchange of good practices and benchmarks'.

<sup>(2)</sup> The purpose of the deadline is so that these benchmarks can be taken into account in the interim report on implementation of the detailed work programme on the objectives of education and training systems in Europe, which the European Council has asked the Commission and the Council to submit to the Spring European summit in 2004.

<sup>(3)</sup> National benchmarks adopted by the Member States in these fields, obviously on a voluntary basis.

<sup>(4)</sup> Point 1.3 and especially points 21 and 23 in COM(2002) 629 final.

<sup>(5)</sup> Points 16, 17 and 18 in COM(2002) 629 final.

<sup>(6)</sup> Point 16 in COM(2002) 629 final.

<sup>(7)</sup> Points 14 and 15 in COM(2002) 629 final.

<sup>(8)</sup> Including, in addition to those mentioned below, points 4.10 and 4.11 of the opinion on the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament entitled 'The eLearning Action Plan — Designing Tomorrow's Education' (OJ C 36, 8.2.2002), points 3.2. and 3.5.3 of the opinion on the Commission staff working paper — Promoting language learning and linguistic diversity (OJ C 85, 8.4.2003) and point 3.5 of the opinion on the Proposal for a European Parliament and Council Decision establishing a programme for the enhancement of quality in higher education and the promotion of intercultural understanding through cooperation with third countries (Erasmus World) (2004-2008).

cooperation in education to achieve the EU's major current objectives, for example:

- In its opinion <sup>(1)</sup> on the White Paper <sup>(2)</sup> on Education and Training — Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society, the EESC felt that '... the aim of modernising and upgrading educational and training systems and, most of all, the aim of achieving a learning society, cannot be reached by the Member States pursuing separate paths or strategies, or by summit-level discussions, investigations or choices. The only way to bring this about is a comprehensive and consciously systematic social effort. This social effort must possess a common and acceptable vehicle for coordination, common and acceptable procedures for reconciling opposing views and common, clear and acceptable subordinate objectives. Only the EU and its bodies, particularly the Commission, can coordinate this social effort to bring about a learning society'.
- In the own-initiative opinion entitled 'The European dimension of education: its nature, content and prospects' <sup>(3)</sup> it says that 'the ESC calls for faster implementation of the positions adopted by the extraordinary European Council in Lisbon. It also feels that an overall effort is required to clarify terms and to define more clearly the responsibilities and roles which will fall to the various levels involved in education. Lastly, it would propose continuous monitoring and evaluation of all measures at all levels, an exercise which the ESC is willing to take part in'.
- In its opinion <sup>(4)</sup> on the Commission Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, the EESC stated that 'it considers lifelong learning and areas of education relating to the information society and the new economy to be part of the European domain of education and learning, and therefore recommends that they should be promoted as part of an open method of coordination and comparative assessment'.

3.2. Based on the views expressed above, the EESC is clearly in favour of the Commission proposal to lay down European education benchmarks. Indeed, it considers the proposal to be

another step in the laborious and long-drawn-out process of trying to develop a European dialogue to clarify educational concepts and to identify and align education goals. These efforts will have to be intensified still further, as achievement of the Lisbon objectives, with which the process is directly associated, requires modern education systems and common high-level education objectives.

3.3. With this in mind, and with a view to the functionality of the proposal and the greatest possible contribution to work towards the EU's major objectives, the EESC points out that:

- it considers the Commission's proposal <sup>(5)</sup> to develop the open method of coordination in the field of education to be ambitious, but realistic;
- it also considers that the proposed method <sup>(6)</sup> for monitoring progress is effective with regard to both the identification of comparable reality-based indicators in each case and the overall image the EU presents to the world and the education sector;
- it appreciates that the decision <sup>(7)</sup> not to translate the proposed European benchmarks to national level for the time being is necessary.

3.4. The EESC agrees with the six specific European benchmarks <sup>(8)</sup> submitted by the Commission to the Council for approval, proposed as they are under Articles 149 and 150 of the EC Treaty. However, it would draw attention to an important shortcoming, which is the failure to cover that which was agreed upon (Council meeting on 14 February 2002) with regard to the three strategic objectives and the detailed programme to implement the thirteen objectives associated with these.

3.4.1. The EESC therefore feels it is essential, since the groundwork has been done, to add at least those associated with strategic objective 3 (Opening up education and training systems to the wider world) <sup>(9)</sup> to the European benchmarks submitted for approval.

<sup>(1)</sup> OJ C 295, 7.10.1996, point 2.3.

<sup>(2)</sup> COM(95) 590 final.

<sup>(3)</sup> OJ C 139, 11.5.2001, point 2.4.

<sup>(4)</sup> OJ C 311, 7.11.2001, point 3.4.1 — last indent.

<sup>(5)</sup> COM(2002) 629 final, point 1.2.

<sup>(6)</sup> COM(2002) 629 final, point 1.2 and COM(2001) 501 final, point 4.

<sup>(7)</sup> COM(2002) 629 final, point 23.

<sup>(8)</sup> Investment, early school leavers, graduates in science and technology, upper secondary education attainment, key competences and lifelong learning.

<sup>(9)</sup> The associated objectives are:

- strengthening the links with working life and research, and society at large
- developing the spirit of enterprise
- improving foreign language learning
- increasing mobility and exchange
- strengthening European cooperation (cf. Council conclusions (2002/C 58/01))

3.4.2. The reasons for the above proposal by the EESC are simple and clear: strengthening the links with working life and research, and society at large; developing the spirit of enterprise; improving foreign language learning; increasing mobility and exchange and strengthening European cooperation are also essential requirements for achieving the Lisbon objectives and therefore any delay in promoting such measures will mean taking that much longer to achieve those objectives.

3.4.3. It would be possible, *inter alia*, to use the corresponding indicators from the employment policy guidelines as key indicators for monitoring progress in the above areas.

3.5. The EESC is particularly interested in the question of lifelong learning and its contribution to achieving the Lisbon objectives. It feels that the process of achieving the EU's strategic goal by 2010 mainly hinges on those who are already in the labour market. In practice, this translates into a need for more ambitious targets for citizens' participation in lifelong learning, more integrated measures and, therefore, more funding for the fastest possible development of the knowledge-based society.

3.5.1. In the context of European benchmarks, one of the measures to ensure the effective functioning of lifelong learning involves making clear how it relates to school education and research <sup>(1)</sup>. The EESC believes that lifelong learning and school education must be seen as part of the same system. This system must also link lifelong learning to research. This means that they must be developed as a logically uniform, *i.e.* comprehensive system wherever possible and that they must adopt a coherent and complementary approach.

3.5.2. The EESC therefore feels that the proposed European benchmark for lifelong learning should be modified to make it more ambitious. A target of bringing the country with the lowest performance today up to the level of the highest performer by 2010 is ambitious, but necessary.

3.5.3. It should be pointed out that, in the new circumstances in which citizens operate (globalisation, new technologies, the rapid pace of scientific developments, competitiveness, sustainable and viable development etc), lifelong learning is a necessity for all citizens, irrespective of the skills they already have. Without letting up on efforts to get the low-skilled <sup>(2)</sup> involved in lifelong learning, similar opportunities must be given to all the other members of society as far as possible, *inter alia* by certifying skills acquired in informal types of education.

3.6. The EESC thinks there should be a European benchmark for public spending on education as a proportion of GDP. A minimum target for 2010 equivalent to the current EU average (5 %) could generate rates of progress in line with what is required for the Lisbon strategic objective.

3.7. It is also worth pointing out that the data given in the Communication refer to the 15 Member States. After Copenhagen, the EESC wonders if it is feasible to extend the scope of the European education benchmarks to take in the new Member States. In any event, the EESC emphasises the need for procedures by the Commission to ensure the smooth incorporation of the new Member States into the whole system of benchmarks.

3.8. The EESC appreciates the work done on indicators to date by the permanent team set up by the Commission. However, one major minus point is the lack of indicators in such areas as European integration, or familiarity with new information and communications technologies. This has already increased the deficit which has existed for some time in national education systems with regard to a European dimension in education. The EESC therefore feels that there is now the need to create a single scientific framework at European level to take care of all the needs associated with indicators of European interest.

3.9. The Lisbon objectives include some particularly important qualitative goals which are not covered in the Commission proposal. These are:

- to convert schools and training centres into multifunctional learning centres, accessible to all, using the most appropriate methods to encompass a broad spectrum of target groups, and

<sup>(1)</sup> For further information, see point 4.2 of the opinion on the Memorandum on lifelong learning, OJ C 311, 7.11.2001. See also CES 71/2003, point 3.5.3, which states: 'The EESC calls for cross-border cooperation in the pre-school area between parents, educators/teachers. The process of sensitising children to language learning must begin very early and the foundations of lifelong learning must be laid at the pre-school stage'.

<sup>(2)</sup> Point 59 in COM(2002) 629 final.

— to set up mutually beneficial learning collaborations between schools, training centres, businesses and research establishments.

3.9.1. The foregoing comment is intended to highlight the need to place particular emphasis on developing qualitative indicators.

3.9.2. The EESC would include among these indicators on the independence of schools and their response to the challenge of decentralisation, as well as on compensatory

measures to alleviate regional disparities or disparities associated with special social and individual needs.

#### 4. Specific comments

4.1. The EESC welcomes the intention to increase investment in education. However, the picture presented is unclear. It therefore proposes that investment should be examined in terms of amount per pupil, level and area of education, but in conjunction with a breakdown of expenditure into fixed and non-fixed items.

Brussels, 26 March 2003.

*The President*

*of the European Economic and Social Committee*

Roger BRIESCH

### **Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the ‘Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament — Towards a United Nations legally binding instrument to promote and protect the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities’**

*(COM(2003) 16 final)*

*(2003/C 133/11)*

On 24 January 2003, the Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the above-mentioned communication.

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 4 March 2003. The rapporteur was Mr Cabra de Luna.

At its 398th plenary session on 26 and 27 March 2003 (meeting of 26 March), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 98 votes in favour and no votes against with two abstentions.

#### 1. General Comments

1.1. The European Economic and Social Committee welcomes the European Commission Communication ‘Towards a United Nations legally binding instrument to promote and protect the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities’ and would like to stress its explicit support for some of the key points made in this Communication.

1.2. The added value of a UN legally binding instrument is to recognise that people with disabilities are entitled to enjoy the full range of internationally guaranteed rights and freedoms

and to do so without being discriminated against on the grounds of disability.

1.3. Thematic conventions, like the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention against all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), have demonstrated added value and complementarity with the existing general human rights instruments, in particular the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.